

COWBOY IN COMBAT

Jimmy D. Black Remembers World War II



Photo: R. Lambert

On January 30, 1943 in the Coral Sea where the average depth is over 29,000 feet, orange flames consuming the USS Chicago illuminated menacing dorsal fins of sharks stalking Jimmy D. Black and his fellow crew members in the water. As Japanese planes strafed the struggling men, blood drew more and more sharks. Planes bled overhead, detonations from the burning ship's arsenal, and the terrified, anguished screams of men hit by gunfire and shrapnel created a nightmarish symphony.

It was the fourth time during World War II that Black had found himself in the water as his ship sank, and though he didn't know it then, it wouldn't be the last. By war's end, Black had defied all odds, surviving the sinking of five ships and the perils of seven landings at Guadalcanal, New Hebrides, New Britain, Saipan, Tinian, Tarawa, and Iwo Jima.

At 0731 on December 7, 1941, Black, who'd just gotten off duty, was on deck of the USS Oklahoma. The ship was at sea, and the order came to abandon battle stations. Black was 95 feet up to the gun turret battle station - without a weapon. In preparation for the attack, all ammunition including firing pins was locked in the gun turret locker. Although one officer with a key was always supposed to be on board, Black says that both officers had been sent ashore the night before, and neither had returned yet.

"We were on the outside and took the first hits," Black remembers. When the order came to abandon ship, Black stared down at the water over 100 feet below as the Oklahoma shuddered from three torpedo hits on the port side. Foul geysers of oil and water spewed over the deck as the ship listed. After the third hit, Oklahoma heeled to a 45-degree angle.

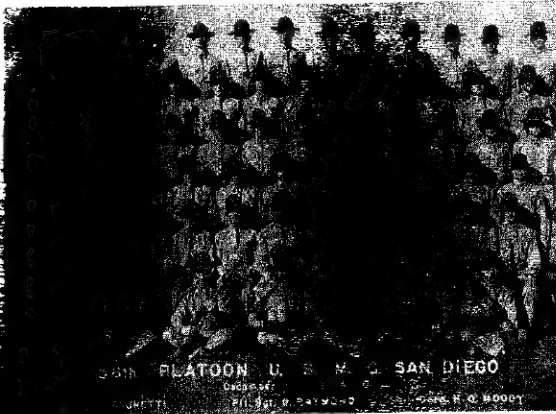
"We're gonna have to jump," Black told Corporal Elmer Drefahl beside him in the crew's nest. "But we should wait until we're over water so we don't risk landing on deck."

Strafing intensified, and when Oklahoma listed far enough to port to allow a clear jump, Black grabbed Drefahl's arm and prepared to dive. But Drefahl refused violently. Explosions forced Black to jump. Holding his arms as close to his sides as possible so

the impact didn't tear them off, he assumed a position that would create the least resistance.

"Don't believe that water isn't hard," Black says now. "When I hit, it felt like concrete."

By the time he surfaced, his lungs were burning. He knew the Oklahoma would suck him under if he didn't get well clear of her, so he swam furiously for shore. Around him bullets stabbed the water, and flames spread. Later, Black realized the impact had torn his clothes off. In the following weeks, US ships began to muster a fleet. Like other Pearl survivors, Black was sought out by ships' commanders wanting to ask questions about being under fire.



Jimmy Daniel Black, 6th from the right, second row from back

He was assigned to the USS Portland and then to the USS Detroit before ending up on the USS Lexington, an aircraft carrier. On May 7, 1942, as the Lexington rejoined Task Force 17 in the Coral Sea, Japanese ships sailed to invade Australia. The Lexington and the Yorktown launched fighter planes that successfully destroyed nine Japanese aircraft.

But on the morning of May 8, a torpedo struck the Lexington's port side followed by three bomb hits from Japanese dive-bombers. At 1700 hours, Black's commander ordered all hands to abandon ship. That's when Black learned that slapping the water discouraged shark attacks. Nearby ships picked the crew from the water but not before several were lost to sharks.

As the Lexington blazed, an American destroyer closed in and fired two torpedoes into her hull.

"They didn't give us any food because they didn't think we'd live long enough to eat it," Black says. Of the twelve men, four returned.

"They wanted to be darn sure the Japanese couldn't confiscate her," Black explains.

From the Lexington, he transferred to the USS Vincennes headed toward the Solomon Islands. Just three months after jumping from the Lexington, Black found himself in the water again. About 0200 on August 9, 1942, the commander of the Vincennes

ordered to abandon ship. The Japanese had successfully targeted the ship with nearly sixty, eight and five-inch shells. Fortunately, the other cruisers of the northern force, the USS Detroit, USS Chicago, and USS Minneapolis, survived. The Japanese shot off the Detroit's props and rudders.

Black was aboard the USS Detroit, a light cruiser that was ordered to the Aleutians in an offensive to prevent the Japanese from crossing the Bering Strait and occupying the islands. The Japanese shot off the Detroit's props and rudders.

"We were ordered to abandon ship," Black recalls. "The skipper came on the PA and said, 'We're thinking of abandoning ship that we'd last about 72 hours in the frigid water. We stayed aboard and fired our big guns. And that's quite a job!' Then, Black got leave to go home. While the Detroit was towed back to Bremerton, Washington, Black took a bus from San Francisco to his home in Chicago, New Mexico. He hadn't seen his parents for four years.

Born one day after the 1918 Armistice of World War I in what was still 'the Wild West,' Black carried a six-shooter before he could read. His family drove cattle herds the full length of New Mexico into Colorado. Until he was age five, Black rode with the cattle men and gathered firewood at mealtime.

"Like all pioneer kids, I had to grow up fast."

After graduating from high school, Black went to work for his brother-in-law, who was for \$3 a day plus room and board damming creeks and filling ponds. In late 1941, Black and Bates were camped in Cheyenne, Wyoming. One morning after the first snow, a rancher rode out on horseback bringing mail.



"He brought me a letter," Black explains. "He and Bates rode their horses to the rancher's house and helped him load his 1938 pick-up truck so he could get through the snow to the highway. There, Black and Bates caught a ride to the recruiting office. Black encountered four men from a CCC camp, and they persuaded him to join the navy since the only boat he'd ever been on was in a pond.

But the morning after Black was on a ship headed for Hawaii, and it would be a long time before he saw home again. When he finally did visit his home in 1942, Black hadn't seen his dog, Old Sport, for four years. Old Sport hadn't forgotten. Arriving home in the middle of the night, Black got a royal welcome from the Border collie.

"He jumped all over me, and his barking woke the whole family up," Black remembers with a catch in his voice.

"Old Sport was just the sweetest dog in the whole country, the only dog I ever loved." Feeling like the worst was over, Black enjoyed the short session with his family unaware the worst was yet to come. Reporting back, he was assigned to the USS Chicago, a heavy cruiser sailing to the Coral Sea. On the

night of January 29, they resisted firing at Japanese Betty Bombers to avoid giving their position away. But about 2000 hours, two Bettys got too close to the Chicago, and the Americans fired on them. Crashing off Chicago's port bow, they illuminated the heavy cruiser, and two torpedoes hit her starboard side.

"We got the tar knocked out of us," Black remembers. "The Louisville took us under tow to Espiritu Island at about four knots." By the next afternoon, it seemed Chicago was out of danger. Then seemingly from nowhere, eleven Bettys roared into view south of New Georgia. The lame Chicago was a sitting duck. "We got hit amidships, and she listed," Black says, and when orders came to abandon ship, he slid into the water and "swam like hell."

The survivors spent that night in the water dodging sharks and bullets. People around him screamed, and Black recalls feeling the sharks brush past him. Terrified and tired, Black could only pray as he slapped the water around him and his wounded comrades. At dawn, rescuers reached Black, but he was almost too weak from exhaustion and dehydration to grab for the Jacob ladder.

"We looked like prunes," he reports, "after being in the water so long, our skin just wrinkled up." On small Solomon Islands, the Japanese established communications centers. Black's next assignment, with eleven other men, was to land and tear one down. They boarded a submarine that took them toward shore and used a rubber raft to paddle to the island. "They didn't give us any food because they didn't think we'd live long enough to eat it," Black says. Of the twelve men, four returned.

Arriving on the island around midnight, they deflated the raft and buried it. By night, they ran, and by day, they hid. Nevertheless, the Japanese discovered them and gave chase. For three days, they eluded the Japanese and finally found the communications center. Nearing total exhaustion, they blew it up. Waiting for nightfall, they smuggled back to the raft and took turns inflating it.

"We paddled and paddled, and the guys asked me how long we'd paddled to get to the island. I kept reassuring them we were almost there (to the rendezvous). Inside, I was praying, 'Lord, let that sucker pop up,' and then there it was, right in front of us," Black relates.

Later, during the battle for New Britain, Black was hit in the back by shrapnel, and his legs were paralyzed. "They loaded me onto a whaleboat and rowed me out to a hospital ship. I was on the second deck with about forty patients in bunk beds," Black remembers. Like most everyone else, he was asleep at 0400 on May 14 when the ship shuddered and people rolled out of bed. Smoke and flames surged through the ship, and the second deck began filling with water.

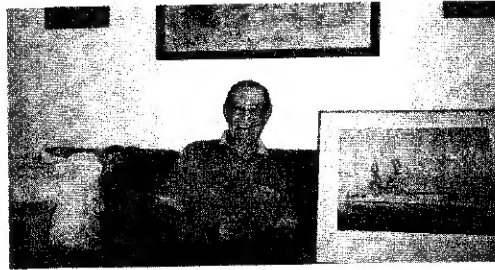
"I rolled onto the floor and wriggled over to the hatch," Black remembers. "I used my arms to pull myself up the cables and got topside. Sailors were putting rafts in the water, and they tossed me overboard. Good thing I landed in the raft, I was dead from the waist down," Black recalls.



Jimmy Daniel Black

HMAS Centaur, clearly marked as a hospital ship, sunk in only three minutes with 268 people aboard. Black was the only patient who survived. He was flown to Pearl Harbor on a mail plane and hospitalized. Within five days, he could walk! The shrapnel had pinched the nerves in his spine, and doctors said when he heaved himself up the hatch on the Centaur, the effort must have dislodged the shrapnel. After recovering, Black went back to the Coral Sea and fought on New Britain...his last battle.

"We were trapped in our foxholes and couldn't talk or make any noise so we threaded a string through the dirt to connect us. Every so often, we'd tug on it and, the other men would tug back. That way, we could let each other know we were alive. There were just three of us left in our outfit. Every hour, I tugged on that string. Finally, I tugged, and no one tugged back. I was all alone," Black says. At nightfall, he crawled out of the foxhole and edged his way in what he hoped was the right direction. It was. Alone, he reported to duty, the sole survivor of his outfit.



Today, the former cowboy doesn't have his medals and citations. Like his many comrades, they lie at the bottom of the ocean.

50th BIRTHDAY